

A Place Where Memories are Made: The Story of Dairy Castle

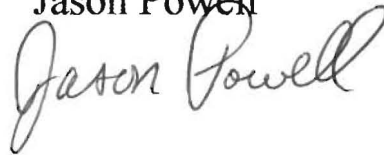
An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Jason Powell".

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Abstract

The purpose of this thesis was to tell a story and reflect on a locally owned ice cream shop, Dairy Castle. Dairy Castle has been in business since 1963 and has been an integral part of the Greencastle Community. Besides employing county teens, Dairy Castle provides a hangout with delicious treats and sandwiches. I was employed with Dairy Castle for my high school career and the first two years of college. The first part is the history of Dairy Castle told through past owners and employees. The second part is a reflection of the management styles while I was there and the lessons I learned.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my parents for getting me here and inspiring me to be better. I would not be here without them and the support of the rest of my family. I would also like to thank Jason Powell for his help on the project.

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History

Dairy Castle opened on May 30th of 1963 under the ownership of Julian and Lois Steele. Their career in the ice cream business began six years prior, in 1958, with their ownership of the "Dairy-ette." The "Dairy-ette" was a drive-in located in Bainbridge, Indiana just thirty minutes north of Greencastle. With the growing demand in Greencastle the Steeles felt the city could support the new business and they were right. Almost 50 years later the business is still thriving with community support.

Julian and Lois bought the land for Dairy Castle in April of 1963 and by the end of the following month had built the structure from the ground up. The structure itself was a simple block building with two walkup windows. The original building is still intact, but there have been add-ons over the years. The structure was just big enough for a few ice cream machines, freezers, and kitchen necessities. There was no seating available indoor or outdoor.

They started with a few sandwiches and soft serve ice cream. The sandwiches offered then are still offered today, but with slightly different recipes due to changes in ownership over the years. The four main sandwiches were Swiss Steak, Beef Barbeque, Coney Island, and Hotdogs. The Swiss Steaks and Coneys are by far the two most popular sandwiches from the original sandwiches. My cousin, who long ago moved away, will stop every time he is in town to get a Swiss Steak sandwich. The soft serve ice cream was provided by Handy Dairy's, another locally owned business that went out of business during my lifetime. Dairy Castle served three flavors of ice cream daily and had a few sundae combinations. A deal running for their first year

anniversary in 1964 was \$.39 for a banana split. The food was not the only thing drawing in customers though.

Customer Service has always been important at Dairy Castle. An article in the local newspaper on their one year anniversary states, "It has been and always will be our policy to produce good quality products along with fast, courteous service, a very minimum of waiting at our two service windows which are always open during business hours." Even though the Steele's sold the business two years later their customer service philosophy held throughout the years.

Julian Steele publicly announced in the local newspaper the sale of the Dairy Castle on April 20, 1965 to Mr. and Mrs. Howard Chase. He claims that he was reinstated to the Postal Service and this was his reasoning for selling. However, through my interviews and other research I believe the underlying cause was the death of his beloved wife, Lois. I find it interesting how so much was said through the newspaper back then. The Steele's put out an ad announcing the sale, while the only reason I knew Dairy Castle was under new ownership in 2009 was because I was working there and it affected me.

Howard and Peg Chase owned Dairy Castle from 1966 to 1970. Although they have both passed on, I spoke with their daughter Pat Inman who managed the Dairy Castle on nights and weekends for her parents. Howard worked as a traveling salesman and was looking for a "home base" to settle into, according to Pat. Since he was still traveling there were two older women that managed it during the day while he was away on business; Pat covered the rest of the shifts.

A day from open to close, with cleaning, was 18 hours long. Every night the machines were taken apart and sanitized and not touched again until morning. Pat was 23, married, and raising kids which made these long days even longer. She was the eldest of eight, who all worked at Dairy Castle. The evening workers were local high school students. When asked if there were any issues with the authority being only a few years older than the rest of the workers she said, "Oh no, but it was a different time then." Pat alluded to how dedicated she was by saying she had her son on Friday and was back working the following Monday with him in a play pen in the back.

In the four years that the Chases owned the store they added a few items to the menu and a few more square feet. The Chases added an enclosed seating area with two small booths and two tables. This was the first step in making Dairy Castle more than just a drive-in. They expanded the menu with homemade ice cream and our palettes with Mushroom ice cream. The Morel Mushrooms they picked would be fried and chopped up into the ice cream. Most customers thought it was pecan ice cream after trying it. They also added additional hot sandwich items to the menu. Their menu changed with the seasons too. A normal Dairy Castle season ran from March to mid-November. The Chili was a bigger seller in the cooler months.

Overall Pat and her siblings enjoyed working at Dairy Castle, but when Howard started to fall ill the work load was just too much. The Chases sold Dairy Castle to the Lykkens in 1970. Looking back, Pat said she would not change anything, but also would not go back and do it over again. She said it was some of the hardest work of her life and would rather not relive that at this age. Pat and I enjoyed a laugh over sharing a common order misunderstanding of "coke" or "cone." 40 years may have pasted, but our problems are still similar.

Gerald and Rovilla Lykken, from my records, owned Dairy Castle from 1970-1993. That makes them the longest owners to date. The Lykkens were another large family of three boys and seven girls who all worked for their mother and father. The Lykkens have since moved away from the Greencastle area. My great aunt, Kandy, worked for the Lykkens one summer in 1974 during high school; this is her story with Dairy Castle.

When Kandy was a child her father would take her in to get ice cream. Gerald allowed her to add up their bill total on pencil and paper. He remembered her from when she was little and gave her a job when she was older. When she started work she was still adding up the bill totals on pencil and paper. Dairy Castle was managed by one of the owners round-the-clock. Despite the white uniforms and ever present boss, it was a still a fun environment. Kandy recalled several nights getting in water fights in the parking lot. One of the duties was to hose down the parking lot to wash away melted ice cream from the summer days. She also claimed that they would purposely make orders wrong so they could take the mess-ups home with them at shift end. I know thirty years later this is sometimes still the case. Although Kandy's time was short there, the overall atmosphere never changed while the Lykkens owned Dairy Castle.

After the Lykkens, Dairy Castle was owned by Ronnie and Rhonda Crain before Jackson Inc. took control. Jacksons, Inc. owned the Dairy Castle from 1993-2002, only making a few adjustments before selling. The biggest change contributed by Jackson Inc. was the Drive-Thru window. This had to be a big expense adding the window, extra cash register, and speaker box. Jackson Inc. also owned the Double Decker in Greencastle, an old drive up restaurant. Dairy

Castle was not a far stretch for Jacksons Inc., but it soon became too much for them to handle. This leads us to our next owner who had a history with Jackson Inc. as well.

Nancy Brock purchased Dairy Castle in June of 2002. She had been helping manage the Double Decker and was offered a position to manage Dairy Castle. She had already received an offer to buy another ice cream shop much closer to her house and was considering that option. Nancy was tired of managing businesses and was ready to be an owner again. When Jacksons sensed her hesitation they pulled a contract that they had already typed up so that they could sell Dairy Castle to Nancy.

As stated above, Nancy was ready to be an owner again. She and her husband owned The Mono, a restaurant next to the train tracks, in Greencastle. Her husband also owns and operates a logging business, which she helped manage. Nancy had experience running a business so there was no concern about her ability. The business however had started to lose its customer base. Nancy and her husband put their logging business on the line in order to purchase Dairy Castle. If it failed they would have lost both businesses. This obviously did not happen though, as business picked back up and Dairy Castle's success continued.

The biggest addition from Nancy was the deep fryer and all the deep fried food. This tremendously increased the size of the menu. French fries, chicken strips, breaded tenderloins, and corn dogs are just a few of the deep fried additions. She also added a few homemade ice cream flavors to the menu. The second biggest addition was the building add-on. Nancy added on another seating area, big enough for four new tables, and a public bathroom. This was a big help when it was raining or too hot to sit outside. The extra indoor seating allowed for more

customers to come in and escape the inclement weather. During the add-on Dairy Castle got a face lift with a fresh coat of paint, blue and white, to match the add-on.

There were two temporary additions that Nancy made that did not stick around for various reasons. The first addition was introducing breakfast to the menu. Nancy was already there at 7:30 am to open the store so why not take the opportunity to serve the early birds that would lineup prior to opening. Breakfast did well throughout the week, but made very little money over the weekends. One reason was that the morning rush wasn't as big on the weekends, but the workers made what little profit there was even smaller. Dairy Castle breakfast was good and the high schoolers would enjoy every bite of their free breakfast on the weekends. The hash rounds were also a great fry substitute at lunch or dinner (or sometimes both!). The second addition was ice cream cakes. Nancy briefly added ice cream cakes, but the time and skill was hard to come by for making and decorating the cakes. The third addition only lasted for one season. Nancy stayed open through the winter because several of the day shift employees were not going to be able to draw unemployment for those three months Dairy Castle was closed. Although there were winter themed ice cream flavors, business was not profitable enough to maintain the year-round season.

The biggest nightmare Nancy dealt with was scheduling around Prom time. It was especially bad when she had several employees from the same high school. Even though this scheduling issue was because of high schoolers, working with them was also one of her favorite parts. She and her husband worked with a church youth group as well. The young atmosphere was something they both really enjoyed.

When asked if she would go back and do it all again, Nancy said “yes, but not now, if they were younger, maybe, but not now.” She has no regrets, but would do one thing differently if she could go back. She would only have let the teenagers work four days a week. This puzzled me at first, but her reasoning made sense. Her defense was that the time they spent working was time they spent away from their families. Some of the employees would work every chance they got and missed out on a lot of other opportunities because of it. I do remember Nancy saying at one point that everyone was required to work at least one weekend night though.

Present

Currently Dairy Castle is owned by Rob and Jane Best under Best Bowling Inc., LLC. Rob and Jane were looking for a business investment when they stumbled upon Dairy Castle. The realtor they were working with had had their woods logged by Nancy and Tom Brock and knew that they owned Dairy Castle. Knowing what Rob and Jane were looking for in a business the realtor mentioned them to the Brocks and asked if they were interested in selling. Nancy was actually looking to go back to school for massage therapy and the timing seemed right. Rob and Jane started running Dairy Castle in March of 2009.

Before Dairy Castle, Rob and Jane had owned several bowling alleys, explaining the name of their limited liability corporation. Even though there seems to be a stark difference between an ice cream shop and a bowling alley the transition was fairly smooth. The biggest obstacle was learning how to make everything. There is so much made “in house” at Dairy Castle that the recipe list is long. The bowling alleys all had food, so the kitchen was no mystery,

and customer service came with those businesses as well, but why Dairy Castle? Why not another restaurant, a brand new restaurant, or another bowling alley?

One of the biggest reasons was the seasonal hours and better hours in general. When they owned the bowling alley sometimes they would not be closed until 3 a.m. The latest you get out of Dairy Castle, even after cleanup, is eleven. Who could complain about a three month vacation? As for not introducing a brand new restaurant, Dairy Castle already had established goodwill with the community. This significantly decreased their risk of failure because there was already a large customer base. As long as things changed for the better there was no reason they would fail. The biggest reason they did not buy another bowling alley was because of the bar that always seems to be connected. They really wanted to get away from alcohol. Rob jokingly said, "No one ever leaves sad after eating ice cream." Making ice cream is a lot easier than dealing with alcoholics and depression. They would never go back to a bowling alley for this reason and because bowling is a dying leisure sport. The ice cream market, however, isn't going anywhere anytime soon. One thing that Jane was particularly thrilled about was the windows. Bowling alleys don't have many windows as it is, and there are definitely not any in the kitchen. In Dairy Castle's kitchen you can see straight through the front of the store. It seems like an insignificant thing, but when you're working twelve hour days at times, those windows become all the more important.

Rob and Jane's first season opening went fairly smooth. It was a smaller opening, looking retrospectively, but not because of their new ownership. One reason was because they did not advertise the reopening very much. The poor weather and struggling economy did not help matters either. Every season has continued to grow since, last season's (2012) opening

being the biggest. Cars were wrapped around the block waiting to get into the drive-thru or the parking lot. Generally about every four years there is a “slow” year. Whether it’s due to the economy, weather, or just a fluke it happens, and Dairy Castle lives on.

The biggest drawback, according to Rob, is the high employee turnover rate. The average hire age is 16, which means they are sophomores or juniors in high school. Any younger and their workable hours are not enough to compensate for their training expense. Their maturity level drops too. The problem with hiring at this age is that you only get 2-3 years out of an employee. Some come back from college and pick up hours here and there, but you still have to hire new ones to make up for the loss. I remember the first year I left for college Dairy Castle lost almost half of its employee base. This is a bit more than average, but there is a possibility of it happening. The minimal working hours is the main reason Rob and Jane choose to hire at a higher age, but it does have its drawbacks.

In the four years Rob and Jane have been managing Dairy Castle they have only had one “horror story.” Last year an older gentleman sat down on a plastic chair in the restaurant and it broke. Jane described him as looking very fragile. They had to call an ambulance to help the gentlemen and make sure he was okay. Excluding this tragic incident, they had only one other disastrous moment. Business had picked up more than expected and their supplies were starting to run uncomfortably low. Having a good relationship with his vendors though, Rob called them for a special delivery and all was well.

In the first years of owning the business Rob was present all day, every day. Jane was still working at the Greencastle dump during the week and Dairy Castle on the weekends. Jane is now the full time day cook and still working weekends. They enjoy working together and

being able to spend time with each other. Having Jane there during the days frees time that Rob has to be there, but he's still present 95% of the time.

Future

The future of Dairy Castle is uncertain, but I think that we can safely say it will be around for a while longer. Approaching its fiftieth birthday, Rob has the idea of celebrating with a blood drive. He really wants to promote giving back to the community. He's not sure on the specifics, but probably a free ice cream cone for giving blood. Dairy Castle will continue to support the community throughout its years.

Best Bowling Inc., LLC bought a building across the street last year. Half of the building is currently being rented to Beltone, a hearing aid store. The other half is the Dairy Castle "office" currently. The plans for this space are still unknown, but it has a kitchen and a bathroom. It could easily be transformed into a rental apartment or another rental space.

Rob was working with his brother for a couple months on purchasing the Dairy-ette in Bainbridge. He planned on buying the Dairy-ette and having his brother manage it for him. The Dairy-ette owner was looking to sell, therefore the price was low, but it also had not been open in several years. There were pros and cons to the situation, but before anything really got moving Rob's brother bought a bowling alley instead. It was going to be a big move for his brother from Monticello. The bowling alley was closer to home and more familiar than an ice cream shop. Rob would still consider purchasing the Dairy-ette if the right person came along to manage it.

Recently, some competitors have opened in Greencastle. A new frozen yogurt shop, Green Apple Frogurt, opened earlier this year closer to DePauw campus. Rob predicts them

closing soon though. There is rarely any business and they are open very few days throughout the week. Charlie's Chill and Grill opened March 1, 2013. Although closer to Robe Ann Park, Rob does not feel threatened by the new shop. Charlie's Chill and Grill was opened by the CEO of Putnam County Comprehensive Services. The store aims to largely employ developmentally disabled people. Later this year another bigger competitor plans to enter the market, Dairy Queen. The new Dairy Queen will be going in where the failed Sonic was located. Greencastle previously had a Dairy Queen when Dairy Castle first opened in the 60s. Rumor was that the previous owner of Dairy Queen burnt the store down for the insurance money though. A local business owner was asking how Dairy Queen planned to compete with Dairy Castle; the owner did not seem to understand the need to compete with Dairy Castle though. Rob has no fears of being shut down by Dairy Queen. The fact that they do not feel the need to compete and that their name alone will be enough, only confirms his theory. There have been other stores in the past too, but all have failed. Only time will tell if Dairy Castle will continue to beat them out.

As for Rob and Jane's future with Dairy Castle, they more than likely will retire in ten to fifteen years. They love the atmosphere and business, so Rob is not firm in his decision. Rob's theory is Dairy Castle is "always for sale, for the right price." So if the right offer came along, they would not hesitate to sell.

My Experience

Dairy Castle has changed so much from what I remember as a kid. My earliest memory of Dairy Castle is during the time Jacksons, Inc. owned it. There were two booths and one two-seater table that had red swivel chairs. I remember fighting over who would get to sit in the red chairs when we went with a large group of people. There was still glass separating the lobby

and the rest of the store where you ordered. I believe the windows still slid open from when it was walk up only. When I was a middle school I remember walking to Dairy Castle after school to eat ice cream and socialize. I also remember getting in an ice fight with two of my friends in the parking lot. I think management caught on though because about the third time we went in to get ice it was not free anymore. My mom worked across the street from Dairy Castle. She frequented there for lunch and got to know the owner because of it. When my mom thought it necessary for me to get a job, she talked to the owner. That's how I got my job at Dairy Castle.

I started working at Dairy Castle in February 2006 as a freshman in high school. I was 14 and terrified on my first day of work. I started working when Nancy Brock was the owner. Since I was 14, I could only work limited hours and my first day was a Saturday morning. The crew I worked with was made up of seniors in high school or older. I knew none of them. I spent my first day making fountain drinks and practicing ice cream cones. By the end of the season I was more confident in my abilities and could make a pretty decent ice cream cone. The following season I got my best friend a job and I was starting to really enjoy my job. By my third season I felt like I could run the place. I learned so much from my first job about life, love, and friendship.

I worked at Dairy Castle for six seasons and have picked up a few hours here and there when I needed a little extra cash. Over those six years I worked for two different owners, Rob Best and Nancy Brock. Their managerial styles, although both effective, are very different. The atmosphere at work and between workers never changed with the managerial switch though.

Personally, I found Nancy to be a scary woman at times. She definitely carried the intimidation factor for a first boss, but she was a very nice lady. Nancy worked day shift through

the week and had a night and weekend shift manager. Sometimes the manager was just another high school teen. Other times it was an older adult. There were a few managers I remember that were awful, but they did not last long. When the manager was another teen we had fun goofing off, but still worked. On really slow mornings we had a habit of gathering in the kitchen, leaving no one up front. Nancy hated this and made a rule that at least one person had to be up front at all times. She also had a saying “if you have time to lean, you have time to clean.” We used to tease each other with this phrase when we were trying to motivate others to clean. We were also poking fun at Nancy’s saying. Nancy would sometimes randomly pop in on nights and weekends. This was probably the best thing she could have done without being there 24/7. The thought of a surprise visit kept us in line for the most part. There were also rumors that she would send in “spies” to make sure we were all working. I do not think she actually ever did this, but the idea of it was all it took to keep us weary. Even though Nancy may not have been there, you were always watching over your shoulder.

I believe Nancy’s management style was effective for high schoolers, but it could have used some improvement. Nancy was not very organized. My first season was the first season she made a set, assigned schedule. Before that she let workers sign up for their hours. She started running into problems getting enough workers to sign-up for certain shifts, which prompted the change. The vendor invoices, from my perspective, had no organizational system. Although profitable, Nancy was rumored to be forgetful with paying the bills. This more than likely stemmed from the lack of organization. Nancy outsourced her accounting and billing, so we never missed a paycheck, but this was an added expense to consider.

The laid back atmosphere allowed us teens to have fun at work, but we were also wasteful and inefficient. Closing clean-up was the most inefficient. When I first started working it would take us an hour to close and clean up. This was partially because we were busy and partially because we procrastinated cleaning. It should only take about thirty minutes to close. Everyone had to stay to help clean up. This meant paying 5-7 people for an extra thirty minutes of work. Plus the manager was always the last to leave and had to go through to check that nothing was missed. If we did miss something, then you would have to pay a higher wage rate for the manager to complete the missed task. I remember having whipped cream and sprinkle fights when a “cool” manager was working on slow days. Had Nancy been there, or had she hired a different manager, these fights would not have happened and the products would not have been wasted. The other side would have been if Nancy was there from open to close, seven days a week.

When Rob first opened he was working open to close, seven days a week. Rob is a hands-on, involved manager. Working with teens, he feels this is the most effective way to run his business. I would agree that this was the best way for his employees to work effectively. However, working effectively does not mean we were not having fun too. There were very few shifts, if any, that I do not remember laughing and having a good time with Rob and the other workers. The amount of fun had was based on the crew and the busyness of the shift. I think Rob has the right idea in joking with his employees, but I think he struggles with line between boss and friend. There were a couple people I would have fired a lot sooner than Rob did or fired when he did not. I understood with the training expenses though why he chose not to fire

those workers sooner. A positive spin on his reluctance to fire is that he gave employees several chances to redeem themselves.

I would argue Rob's management style is more efficient and effect than Nancy's style. Nancy's lack of presence made it easier to be unproductive. When workers were unproductive under Nancy there were things that could have been done (i.e. filling, cleaning, restocking). With Rob those tasks were done before the fun and unproductivity commenced. That way if business did pick up we were prepared for it. On the extremely slow day we would do heavy duty cleaning or organizing with Rob. Those were the days under Nancy that we'd have our whipped cream fights.

Having a familiar face when you go in to Dairy Castle, as a customer, is nice as well. Knowing who the owner is when you have a question or complaint is convenient. If you only came in at night, the odds of you seeing Nancy were slim. If the manager that night was a high schooler, a customer with a question or complaint may not be satisfied with their remedy because they felt there was a lack of authority. Rob was always there, so as a customer you knew that you were getting the best remedy for your situation or that your complaint was being heard.

Being at your business from open to close you know everything that goes on. You are more aware of how your workers are performing and if they are meeting standards. If you never work with or monitor your employees you can't be sure of their performance. Unless you have dependable managers, it is hard to know if they will evaluate employee performance accurately. If you never see an employee in action, you don't know how they handle situations,

therefore you don't know if they are manager material. If you can tolerate the hours and customers, it is definitely beneficial to be present.

Lessons Learned

As I stated above I have learned a lot from job at Dairy Castle. I learned about myself as a person, who I am as a worker, and the world around me.

Around my fourth season I was confident enough to think my way was right and better than anyone else's way. I learned quickly that this was not the person I wanted to show to the world though. Even if I thought my way was best, I needed to have patience. I had very little patience with new people that seemed "incompetent" in my mind. New employees frustrated me when they did not try or were afraid to ask questions. It was very hard for me to relate to them, to go back and remember how frightened I was on my first day. I adjusted and kept my frustration hidden from my coworkers. In summary, I learned confidence and patience from working at Dairy Castle.

I learned I am a hard worker, but working with the public can get to anyone. When I learned the kitchen I rarely wanted to leave. After three years of dealing with rude, uncaring customers it was a relief to be behind the scenes. I always was looking to impress Rob and Nancy though. I felt I had something to prove because I started so young. Even though I felt I had proven myself, I was disappointed when a person I trained got a manager position over me. I did not hold it against them though and worked under them as I would have any other person. When Rob took over I felt the need to prove myself again. I knew I was a hard worker at that point, but had never been assured of this fact. I also wanted to show Rob he could count on me.

I was hoping he would see managerial skills in me and promote me now that I was a senior in high school. His management style was unknown to me at that point in time.

There was always “Dairy Castle Gossip” spreading around about this worker or another. I took away more than the gossip though. I learned how to get along with coworkers, even when it was difficult. I learned how to diffuse customer situations effectively as well. I learned that just because you think you deserve something doesn’t mean you will earn it. Karma will always come back around though. If you treat people with the kindness and respect they deserve, they will treat you the same in return.

The most important thing I learned for Dairy Castle is enjoy your work. If you enjoy your work the days go by faster and easier. The people around you tend to enjoy work more when they’re around others who are enjoying themselves. When I think back to my time at Dairy Castle I think about all of the fun times I had, not the infuriating customers and workers. Sometimes those fun times were with the infuriating workers. Through the interviews and my own experience, I learned that when you enjoy your work you are a happier person. I can only hope that my future career will be just as enjoyable as my time as Dairy Castle.

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